

# Anxiety UK

## **The relationship between anxiety and hair loss**

Hair loss (androgenic Alopecia) generally occurs after puberty and affects up to 80% of males and 50% of females over the course of their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> A progressive thinning of hair occurs due to the influence of dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a metabolite of testosterone, amidst a backdrop of genetically determined vulnerability of the hair follicles, predominantly in the frontal, temporal, and vertex areas.<sup>2</sup>

Hair loss manifests differently between sexes. In men, the hairline recedes gradually from the front and temples. Women typically don't experience a receding hairline but instead, their hair loss tends to be more diffuse, occurring evenly across the scalp. However, occasionally men may experience hair loss patterns more commonly associated with women, and vice versa.

Hair loss can deeply impact individuals, leading them to perceive themselves as older and fear potential rejection in relationships. The concern extends beyond physical appearance, as those affected also feel a decline in their social attractiveness. Research suggests that people tend to associate physical attractiveness with socially desirable traits like friendliness, even without knowing much about a person. Recognizing that hair loss may put them at a social disadvantage can profoundly affect individuals' psychological well-being. This evidence summary presents the results of a systematic review which is considered the highest level of evidence that published on the topic.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **Characteristics of the studies**

The systematic review included a total of 13 studies with 9614 participants. The aim of the review is to present the psychological aspects of hair loss.

### **Quality of the studies**

The studies included in the review have not been appraised for quality, however, it appears that they varied in quality from low to moderate as some of them dated back to 1992 and the most recent was published in 2021. The authors of the review also included a recent review published in 2021 including 7995 patients.

### **Results**

- The included studies demonstrate that individuals experiencing androgenetic alopecia often struggle with feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and reduced self-esteem.
- A significant number of patients are deeply concerned about the possibility of their hair loss worsening and others noticing it. This psychological stress frequently prompts them to adopt various coping strategies. Examples of strategies include compensation, avoidance, and acceptance.
- Their dissatisfaction with their hair often translates into dissatisfaction with their overall body image, resulting in a simultaneous decrease in their quality of life.
- High levels of distress were linked with compensation and avoidance behaviors, whereas acceptance was inversely correlated with distress, particularly in advanced stages of hair loss.

- Among female, 70% of those experiencing hair loss reported feeling very upset to extremely upset about it. Additionally, females with hair loss indicated lower levels of self-esteem and quality of life compared to the control group or those with no hair loss.
- Another study, which interviewed females experiencing hair loss, revealed that 88% of them felt that their hair loss had a negative impact on their day-to-day lives.
- An included study in the review found that depression was more prevalent among female patients compared to male patients (55% vs. 3%), whereas anxiety (78% vs. 41%) and aggressiveness (22% vs. 4%) were more commonly observed in male patients than in female patients.
- One of the included studies in the review reported on the HADS mean scores (anxiety score) in the hair loss group and found that the scores (anxiety 7.9 and depression 5.4) were significantly higher than the mean scores in the control group (anxiety 5.6 and depression 3.6) ( $p < 0.001$ ).
- Huang et al. (2021) conducted a recent meta-analysis, affirming the prevailing notion that there exists a notable correlation between androgenetic alopecia and a moderate decline in health-related quality of life and emotional well-being.<sup>4</sup>
- It's crucial to communicate realistic treatment outcomes to patients and help manage their expectations effectively. Unrealistic expectations could also result in poorer psychological outcomes and premature discontinuation of treatment.

## Conclusion

The current evidence suggests that people with hair loss are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, especially adults with severe hair loss.

## Implications for practice and research

Dermatologists and other health care providers should be aware of the risk of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem in patients with hair loss so that they may counsel patients appropriately and consider referral to appropriate specialists to psychological and psychosocial support.

## References

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4. Huang C, Fu Y, Chi C. Health-related quality of life, depression, and self-esteem in patients with androgenetic alopecia: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Dermatol*. 2021;157(8):963-970.